

NEW HAMPSHIRE GUN SHOW

BY JAMES J COLLINS

To attend a gun show in New Hampshire is to walk onto a Hollywood movie lot. The characters you rub shoulders with come armed and dressed in period costumes. Not that they dress special for the event, rather this is how some of them dress all the time. It is just that the show tends to concentrate so many of them all in the same place.

Arriving at the armory where the event occurs, your first problem is finding a place to park. Thousands attend from all over New England as you can tell from the plates on the vehicles parked helter skelter in the parking lot and for blocks around. You know the vehicles are associated with the show by the NRA stickers emblazoned on back windows, the rear ends of trucks and recreation vehicles. Other sure give a ways are the gun racks in the back windows of pickup trucks caked with dried mud, carrying the challenging decal that reads,

PROTECTED BY SMITH AND WESSON

You must stand in line - if standing twenty deep covering the steps for fifteen yards constitutes a line - until the door opens. This is where you first become aware of the dress code. If you do not have on something in either khaki, rawhide, or with a western motif, or if you do not look like a lumberjack, a mountain man, or a hunter, you are immediately pegged as an amateur in the gun show business. Beards are the other common feature, and the wilder the better. No contest exists for this homegrown finery, but looking like you have birds nesting under your chin gives you certain acceptance in this society. In addition, the jargon is like a series of passwords. You hear things like, "I prefer an over and under in the tight cover . . .", and "This luger was discontinued in 1939. That's why it's so valuable." This last conversation is accompanied with a flourish as the weapon in question is withdrawn from under a military camouflage jacket. By the way, never pick a fight with someone from New England. They all seem to be well armed, yet the crime rate is exceptionally low. In hind sight, maybe because so many seem to be armed, that nobody wants to be pushy, or maybe it's the New Hampshire state motto, 'LIVE FREE OR DIE'.

At the appointed time, the doors open and all go in. No rush, no jostling, rather a very orderly and cordial movement. Of course the three men carrying reverse slung deer rifles over their parkas don't draw a second glance, nor do the two lugging ammo boxes filled with God knows what. All climb an interior set of stairs and filter in through a large set of doors manned by local police and members of the state Gun Owners association. You pay your four dollars, display any weapon you have brought to sell so it can be tagged to prove you had it with you as you arrived and you step into another world.

First there is a display put up by the New Hampshire National Guard, which all must pass. After all this is their armory and they are proud of the work they do. Several guardsmen wearing different dress uniforms and combat gear are there to answer questions.

They move around under camouflage netting which adds a touch of realism to their sandbag bunkers and arms display. For this is an opportunity for members of the Guard to display their wares to people who really appreciate the intricacies of automatic rifles and Dragon anti-tank weapons. Besides the Guard uses this as an opportunity to sign up volunteers who have a natural affection for things military.

Next you enter the main hall of the armory. Forty feet high and as big as two football fields side by side, it is filled to overflowing with tables and hardware. And what hardware. Crew serviced anti-aircraft weaponry act as a draw to a series of tables selling surplus military rifles. Four tables are arranged as a small section of a larger array of tables covering a two hundred foot section of floor. Each sub-area has its own display and is serviced by separate personnel. Initially the area seems chaotic but the lines of ownership are known to those who count the proprietors.

Civil War aficionados can go to ten different displays that cater to their specialty. The owners often dress in period costumes to better market their wares. As a minimum they will wear a Union or Confederate cap to demonstrate their stock of original souvenirs of that great conflict or they will offer recent replicas of swords or firearms from that period. Supply and demand set the price for long sort after memorabilia from that tragic war but Yankee know how put the replica manufacturers in business. If a pistol from the Civil War is to grace the wall of your den, you may be just as happy to have the next best thing in its place, if you can save three hundred dollars in the deal.

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